



“I Don’t Like Lent”

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by

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COVER ART: *“Could Ye Not Watch One Hour with Me,”* a watercolor painting by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902). The painting is thought to have been completed sometime between 1886 and 1894. This painting is in the Public Domain. *



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“I Don’t Like Lent”

THEY wandered leisurely out of the dining room and took their places around the logs that burned on the large living- room hearth. Mrs. Bradley appeared, bearing a tray loaded with coffee cups, the essentials for brewing coffee, a tall brandy bottle, and the necessary small glasses. The guests had found comfortable chairs and dropped into them with the realization that the chairs were very, very comfortable indeed before the Bradley’s’ open fire.

Most of the guests took coffee. Their host filled a small glass with brandy until another drop would have meant an overflow. He then lifted it appreciatively in the direction of Father Hall.

“Better have a brandy,” he suggested. “Lent starts Wednesday.” The priest looked up with a quizzical smile.

“Thanks, I prefer the coffee. But, what’s Lent got to do with brandy? Don’t you remember the old saw, “Thank God for the Council of Trent that legislated about food but not about drink?”

“I Hate Lent”

They all laughed. Grace Melville, young, charming, and only a few years older than the Bradley twins (both out for the evening), glowered into the fire.

“I don’t like Lent,” she said, quite savagely. They all looked at her for a moment, and then the priest heard them sigh in unison.

“Thanks for the honesty,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Since we’re playing truth, I hate Lent.”

“Never liked it until I got beyond the age when it has to be observed,” old Mrs. Harrison agreed, in her high, but emphatic voice. “Now I love it. I love to see you young people groaning about it. I love to have my little snack between meals and my meat three times a day, while you pick the bones out of herring and grow ravenous about ten o’clock in the evening.”

Not Bound

“Not being a Catholic, I don’t much mind it,” smiled Dr. Allenby, nodding companionably to youngish Shirley Green, who was of his same lack of faith.

“Lucky dog,” growled their host.

For a moment, Father Hall felt personally responsible for Lent. He had the sudden impression that they all thought he had started the business of the forty-day fast. Really, he assured himself rapidly, he had not started Lent. Lent was one of those things he had inherited from the early days of Christianity.

“Honestly,” he said, “I’m not responsible for Lent.”

Not Guilty

Mrs. Bradley looked properly embarrassed. He had phoned from the library, where he had spent the day grubbing up some local color he needed for the novel he was writing, and she had begged him to join them at dinner. He had been all set to motor back to his Lakeside parish and had called up only to get some first-hand information on the beloved twins, Dick and Sue. It had taken only a moment before he consented. Now she saw him being pushed into a corner by the thoughtless remarks of herself and her friends.

“Oh, no,” she said hurriedly. “We know you’d never have thought up anything so disagreeable as Lent.” The priest assumed a very solemn look.

He said, “Maybe that’s where you are wrong. Maybe if I had the doing of it, I’d have put in two Lents each—one in winter for the good of your souls and one in summer for the good of your bodies. The fact is, I thoroughly approve of Lent. I think it’s a noble institution.”

Survival

“Really now!” exclaimed Dr. Allenby. As professor of history at State University, he was always interested in the recurrence of these mediaeval ideas among his Catholic acquaintances. He thought them distinctly interesting.

“In any case, I don’t see,” went on the priest, “what you are worrying about. Do any of you really fast?” “Well,” Bradley coughed, “I give up cigars.”

“Which certainly puts the rest of the family in a penitential mood,” his wife added. I’m a hard-working man,” Bradley said, apologizing, “and I need my food.”

“Hard-working!” scoffed his wife. “While you’re out on the golf course making important contacts, who does the work in your office? That poor little secretary of yours, Nell Sullivan. I bet Nell fasts.”

Natural Fasts

“As far as I can make out,” the priest said, looking at Grace Melville, who had started all this, “practically every girl I’ve heard of fasts all the year round—except for nibbles

between meals. I'll wager that Miss Melville here, or your secretary, Nell, eats a slice of toast and tosses off a cup of coffee for breakfast, lunches on a nourishing lettuce sandwich or a shrimp salad, and eats at most one meal a day. That is, I'm told by competent authorities the ordinary diet of the modern young lady."

Dr. Allenby nodded in agreement. "I wish the young ladies who came to my morning classes looking pale and haggard would once in a while eat a decent breakfast."

Medieval

"That's quite a different thing." Shirley Green took up the cudgels. "Lent always seems to me so—well, so medieval. Isn't that what you think?" Dr. Allenby nodded noting that this young woman was intelligent. He wished she were in his history class. She seemed to read his mind. "It makes me think of the ancient days when it wasn't quite holy to take a bath, and when men went off into the desert and spent the rest of their lives on top of a stone column. It's not, well, it's not modern."

"Modern or not," repeated Grace, "I don't like Lent. I'm embarrassed if I go to a movie. I feel that I shouldn't play bridge. If a dessert is good, I have an instinct that I ought to give it up. It's a most uncomfortable time."

Give It Up

"Honestly, Father," said Mrs. Bradley in all sincerity, "don't you think that the Church will give up Lent one of these days?"

They all looked at the priest with real interest. Most of the group knew very little about him. Because he was a priest, the non-Catholics among them expected him to rise indignantly and cry out, "The Church never changes!" They looked forward, a little hesitatingly, to some sort of "scene." Instead, Father Hall gazed thoughtfully into the fire and answered with some hesitation.

"The Church may do that. Of course, it can. On one occasion, it has done so. The Church abolished Lent for the Spaniards, to thank them for their successful crusades against the Mohammedans. The Bishop of Louisville, after the floods there, cancelled Lent with a stroke of his pen; the people could eat meat even on Friday. Lent is not a matter of faith or morals. I suppose it is really dearest to the heart of the Church because it recalls the forty days' fast of Christ. After all, the Church argues, if Christ, who was without sin, fasted completely from food for forty days, we who are sinners should be willing to give a pale and incomplete imitation of His perfect fast by observing Lent!"

Just Sentiment

Dr. Allenby looked at Miss Green with a flash of understanding.

“Oh,” said Miss Green, catching his meaning, “if Lent is just a matter of sentiment—”

“One really,” agreed the professor, “must not argue with sentiment.”

Dr. Allenby and Miss Green sat back to their coffee, the argument completed.

“I’m awfully dumb,” said Grace, glad that she could round off the discussion she had started by picking on a harmless point, “but it’s just dawning on me that our Lent lasts forty days because of Christ’s forty-day fast. It is a lovely sentiment.”

Now, Father Hall was alert.

Unless

“Sentiment!” The forty days are selected as a matter of sentiment, but fasting has nothing to do with sentiment, believe me! Christ was no sentimentalist. The Church remembers what He said with flat emphasis. “Unless you do penance you shall all likewise perish.” The choice was clear: Do penance or be eternally lost.

“In fact, today most people need someone else to force them to do difficult things. It takes an infantry to convince children to eat spinach. Did you ever see a nurse forcing a strong man to take medicine that he disliked? A trainer has to run along with a boxer in training to ensure his charge doesn’t stop his roadwork and start picking daisies in the first cool spot.”

“Do penance!” cried Christ.”

“I don’t want to,’ says man.”

“Or perish,’ said Christ.”

“Well, one of those days I’ll get around to it,’ says the man. So the Church wisely steps in and says, ‘All right, children, just to simplify the whole thing, you do penance for forty days during Lent, and that will cover a large section of your responsibility. Let’s all together, the whole world of us Christian men and women, get this business of penance done and off our minds.’ Keeping it simple.”

Shirley Green shook her head.

Why Penance?

“Frankly, it’s not simple. Why should we do penance? I see no purpose in penance at all. It sounds sort of Hindu-fakir-like.”

“It’s connected,” explained Dr. Allenby, in an aside that was, of course, loud enough for the entire group, “with the other medieval concept of sin.”

Father Hall shook his head.

“Oh, no, doctor. With the universal concept of sin, sin is a crime against God, and crime must be punished. Sin is an insult to our heavenly Father, and you have to amend an insult with an apology. Sin is an act by which the will turns from its Creator to a creature, and that will must be straightened out and sent back towards its right direction.”

Shirley’s brow grew deliberately furrowed.

“But penance—”

Natural

“Penance,” said Father Hall, “is simply a matter of readjustment.” The criminal or the sinner says, ‘My sin is going to be justly punished either in this world or in hell or purgatory. I wonder if God would not be more likely to forgive my crime if I punished myself just to prove that I’m sorry and admit I rate punishment.’ Thus, he does penance to prove he is sorry and to forestall God’s punishment. ‘I’ve insulted my Father,’ says the sinner. ‘I’ll prove that I’m feeling deeply apologetic by doing something hard for Him.’”

“So he does something hard, a penance. ‘By sin,’ reasons the sinner, ‘I turned my will away from God and grabbed this creature. All right, to prove that I know I made a mistake, I’ll turn away from this creature—food, drink, a good time, the theatre, candy—and turn deliberately to God. God will see that I am trying to get my will straight in line once more.’ That’s all it is, this penance. It sounds very logical to me.”

If Sin Exists

“Logical, of course,” said Dr. Allenby, “if you accept the assumption that there is such a thing as sin.”

“An assumption,” smiled Father Hall, “that the world finds very difficult to escape. We won’t go into that right now, but penance is so natural that when a man is sorry for a crime, he will give himself up to the punishment of the law. When a man has offended a

friend, he goes out of his way to do something to make up for it. When a man finds his will leading him into evil paths, he makes difficult efforts to force his will back into right lines. Just a matter of common sense, that's all."

Dr. Allenby was a little piqued.

Love Matters

Dr. Allenby brushed his face with an immaculate linen handkerchief. Then, in the most elaborate off-handed way, he said, "Of course, if your God is so tremendous and infinite, and we, as His creatures, are so small and insignificant, I really don't see what difference it could make to Him if we give up of things like candy, coffee, cigars, or a night at the movies."

Mrs. Bradley admitted in her heart that, as the professor put it, the idea of giving up an ice-cream soda for an infinite God looked just a little absurd.

"Your difficulty," replied the priest, "is, of course, based on the supposition that God is not our Loving Father who is enormously interested in His children. What is little when love is concerned? I've seen a mother bursting with love when a child brought her the most ridiculous mess of paper and chalk with the proud, 'I made this to give to you, mother.' I recall seeing a father, who is not so terribly far from us, wearing in his buttonhole a withered dandelion. His little daughter picked it for him and put it into his lapel. I think he preferred that to a gardenia. Wouldn't you, my good and blushing friend?"

Truth to tell, the whole group could see that the red in Mr. Bradley's cheek was not due to the sudden warmth of the hearth logs.

Sacrifice

"You must remember, professor," Father Hall continued, "that one of the sweetest ways in which we can show our love for a person is with gifts. We always say, 'It isn't the value of the gift, it's the spirit of the giver that matters.' That's why trifles wrapped with love are much more precious than tiaras or mink coats given without love."

"The giving of a gift to God is all we mean by 'sacrifice.' In the Old Law, the Jews gave Him cattle, bread, and wine. We Catholics give Him His divine Son in the Mass. We also want to give Him something that we would personally like for ourselves. So, we sacrifice cigars, wine, candy, or the movies. We say, 'O God, I'll give them up just to show that I do love You.' The harder we find it to give them up, the more precious they will be to our Father."

“It’s perfectly true that God is made no happier by our giving Him a chocolate malted milk, a stick of chewing gum, or a highball. God is not likely to find a use for any of those things. Yet, it means a lot that we, His children, want to give Him the things we happily would hug to our own selfish hearts. We give Him what we somehow very much want.”

“We don’t say, ‘Dear God, during Lent I am going to give up anchovies for breakfast for Your sake.’ Anchovies for breakfast would make us thirsty all through the day. Instead, we say, ‘I’m going to give You these cigars, which are pretty necessary to my happiness, or this cold drink in the afternoon, which has come to be rather essential to me.’ We give it to God precisely because it would make us happy to have it ourselves.”

The professor was unimpressed and unconvinced.

Manicheanism

“There is,” he said, “a certain strain of the Manichean about even the best of Catholics. Don’t be offended, Father; but it astonishes me to see how heresies triumph even over the Church that condemns them.”

Old Mrs. Harrison roused herself indignantly. “I wish,” she sniffed, with the privilege of the old to insult the younger, “that professors wouldn’t be obfuscators. Why must they drag in long and technical terms?” She faced the professor, her feathers ruffled. “What kind of a strain is that?”

“Manichean,” smiled Dr. Allenby. “They were a group of heretical Christians who thought that everything you could see or taste or feel was bad. They believed that the devil made the entire visible world and God made only the spiritual world. Thus, the good Christian must despise everything that could be seen, tasted, or felt. A good dinner was considered essentially evil. A beautiful landscape was positively naughty. Good music was wicked. The higher the saint, the more that saint went around, like the monkeys in the famous monkey trio, holding his ears, shutting his eyes, clapping a hand down over his mouth. A good Christian gave up everything pleasant. You see, that’s just what is behind Lent. The world is pleasant; therefore, it must be wicked. Because it is wicked, let’s give it up, at least for Lent.”

Bunched

“The Puritans must have been Manicheans,” suggested Grace Melville.

“They were,” agreed Dr. Allenby. “It was wicked to be happy. It was a sin to have a good time.”

“Well,” boomed Mr. Bradley, waving his brandy meditatively back and forth in front of his nostrils, “that explains those infernal old Prohibitionists. May their ghosts never walk!”

“It also explains people like the Hindu fakirs,” supplemented Shirley Green, “and Buddhist monks and those greasy old fathers of the desert who never took a bath and lived on bean soup and black bread dipped in water. They disliked the world because it was beautiful. Isn’t it sad that they thought the devil was responsible for all the beautiful things of the world?”

Too Simple

They all looked properly distressed. All except Father Hall, who laughed aloud.

“Of all the easy things in the world and of all the false ones, I know nothing compared to linking together Hindu fakirs, Prohibitionists, saints, Puritans, and fathers of the desert all in one sentence.”

“But they belong there,” cried the professor almost angrily. “They all hated the world because it was beautiful. They were all convinced that the visible world, the things that delight the eyes and ears and palate, were of the devil and essentially bad.”

“Not the saints and the fathers of the desert,” said the priest.

“Well, didn’t they go around preaching penance? Didn’t they have Lents of seventy days instead of forty? Didn’t they get excited and scared out of their wits when they saw people having a good time? Look at Girolamo Savonarola.”

“A great man, but not a saint,” Doctor Allenby said. He was somewhat angry and in no mere conversational tone, he added, “They were beauty haters. And their spirit still rules over your Christian Lent.”

Mrs. Bradley gathered herself to spring conversationally into the ring and separate the two contestants. But she was not as quick as Father Hall. To her relief, though, his voice was pleasantly calm and his manner totally unruffled.

Beauty Lovers

“Again, I say, Catholic saints and fathers of the desert did not hate worldly beauty. That is the precise point missed by people who fail to understand the saints’ perspective on this subject. Saints, perhaps more than other men in the world, understood beauty. They were the great lovers of beauty. They thought the world was all so marvelous that only God deserved to have it for His own.”

“Bosh!” said Dr. Allenby, rudely. Then, he had the good grace to laugh at himself. “Sorry, Father. I’ve been terribly rude. But, really, I haven’t your gift of playing with words. I’m not a Jesuit.”

“Neither am I,” said Father Hall, “and believe me, I’m not playing with words at all. I’m playing with hard facts that support a human phenomenon. I’m talking about the very thing that makes the Christian ascetic—whether a hermit in the desert, a sales clerk giving up a strawberry sundae, a nun keeping silence from twelve to three o’clock on Good Friday, or a business man refusing to put salt in his soup. I’m talking about the very thing that makes the Christian ascetic different from all the others you talked about. To the Christian, the world is too, too beautiful. It isn’t evil. It’s lovely. That is why one has to be careful what one does with it.”

A Worthy Gift

“I don’t understand you at all,” said Shirley Green.

“Too deep for me, and I’m supposed to be a Catholic,” chimed in Grace Melville, feeling that the priest was talking just a little like the ghost of Chesterton.

Father Hall saw he had to explain.

“In the first place, remember that a Christian does not merely renounce something unless that something is wrong or a matter of sin. The Christian renounces in the sense of giving to God. Nobody would insult a friend by giving him something that he thought was evil or ugly or that he himself didn’t like. A lover doesn’t walk up to his ladylove and say, ‘I know this is a bunch of milkweed and nettles but, because the horrible bouquet is so hideous, I am giving it to you.’ That’s not a gift or a sacrifice; that’s an insult. A man doesn’t say to his friend, ‘Here, you take this steak I ordered. The darn thing is tainted and, anyhow, I don’t like steak.’ He doesn’t say, ‘Here’s my dog. It’s got a vicious temper. I suspect it’s infected with rabies, it will probably bite you or the children, but please accept it with my compliments.’”

“Similarly, a Christian wouldn’t offer God the sacrifice of something that the Christian regarded as ugly, vicious, worthless, or belonging to the devil. No, the Christian ascetic renounces something because the Christian realizes the world is so glorious that only God can rightly wear its jewels upon His hand; only God can rightly enjoy the world’s great music; and only God, who painted the great landscapes of earth, can properly appreciate them.”

Too Lovely

“Frankly,” said Grace, returning once more to that unpleasant word, “I can’t help but feel that it is a little daft.”

Father Hall asked, “You think it’s daft to want to give the God you love the loveliest things in the world? That’s what a man does for the woman he loves. That’s what a mother does for her child. However, we are not through; no, not quite yet. There is another aspect.”

They all sat looking at the priest intently. He was being very casual about it all, but very emphatic.

“The Christian who gives up something beautiful is likely to be proving conclusively that he or she entertains the highest appreciation for that something and has the keenest knowledge both of the thing and of him or herself.”

“That,” said Dr. Allenby, with a touch of irony, “is undoubtedly an amazing statement.”

Panegyric

“Then let me paraphrase the process that supports Christian penance and renunciation. Says the saint, ‘O Lord, if anything, you made the world too beautiful. It is too compellingly sweet. It is too filled with beautiful music and lovely landscapes and charming people and the sound of laughter and the glittering of jewels and strength and grace and power. Friendship is almost too sweet. Music is too entralling. Jewels are too fascinating. Wealth is too powerful. Eloquence is too persuasive. Food is so varied and delicious that I find myself inclined to be a glutton. There is too much of warmth and fire in wine.’”

“The saint sums up the world in a kind of ecstatic panegyric.”

But Men

“Then the saint turns to history and he sees clearly that, because the world is so glorious and beautiful, mankind has made it their god. Men have found the world so lovely that they believe they do not need to go one step further and find its Creator. Worse, men became so enraptured with the world that they committed all sorts of crimes to facilitate claiming it for themselves. They murdered any man who stood between them and the jewel that fascinated them. They lusted after the woman whose face and figure enthralled them. They robbed others, grew frightfully selfish, clung to perishable and destructive objects due to their complete absorption with the visible world.”

“The trouble with the world was not that it was ugly, but that it was so terribly beautiful and so overwhelmingly fascinating that it made men forget everything else and sell their souls, their honor, their time, and their eternity to possess even some small portion of it.”

Untrustworthy

“Logically, the Christian went the next step. He said to himself, ‘I wonder how far I can trust myself with this beautiful world? Am I sure that I won’t become greedy and selfish too? Will I someday be willing to steep my hands in blood or my body in lust to get possession of one of those lovely things? Am I trustworthy enough to be let loose in this glorious treasure house that God has made?’”

“Being shrewdly honest about himself, his answer was no. He distrusted himself, first because he had seen men and women who were stronger than himself go astray because they were misled by the beauty that fills the world and weakened by the compelling attraction to God’s beautiful creatures. He distrusted himself also because he feels he is personally neither strong nor trustworthy. He is a little like a child turned loose in a candy shop, apt to gorge himself to violent sickness. He is somewhat like a man with an inclination to kleptomania left alone in an unguarded jewelry shop. He is a chap with sticky fingers suddenly behind the cashier’s window. He isn’t sure of himself. He knows the world is gloriously beautiful and he is afraid that he is pitifully weak.”

“Perhaps the only thing in God’s creation that the saint really condemns is himself. Certainly, his attitude is that he is the one weak thing in all God’s glorious world. It is consequently his business to see that he learns to master himself.”

Schooling Oneself

“Therefore, the saint schools himself not to gorge by giving up even legitimate sweets. He masters his inclination to steal by refusing to accept even what he is allowed to touch. He makes himself trustworthy by learning to restrain his hands and steel his will. The saint gives up and renounces and he fasts and does penance—not in a spirit of contempt for God’s creation, but in a spirit of self-distrust.”

“Personally, I can’t help but feel he is a fairly wise and logical person. He is paying a tremendous compliment to the world God has made; and he is training his will so the beauty of the world, which has misled so many, won’t ever make of him a murderer, a thief, an adulterer, a man of dishonesty, greed, or lust.”

Father Hall paused. Then he smiled and spread his hands in an embarrassed gesture and said, “That’s all. Don’t you think that makes the saint very much different from any of the other so-called ascetics of the world.”

Interruption

Mrs. Harrison roused herself again and demanded, "What's this got to do with Lent? I'm no father of the desert."

"You're a dear grandmother, and we're so glad that you are in our living room," smiled Mrs. Bradley. But, the woman declined to be flattered.

"We start on Lent and then we go to Manicheans and we end up being fathers of the desert. I wish people nowadays could carry on a conversation without straying over the entire inhabited earth. What's the connection?"

Self-Training

"Tell her, Father," said Mr. Bradley, taking a penultimate sip of his brandy.

Father Hall replied, "Only this, Mrs. Harrison. During Lent, we imitate the saints just a little. We train ourselves to give up the good things of the world just to prove that we can. Good things have a way of mastering us. Good living, good food, good drink, riches, comfort, and amusements have a way of making men slaves. God meant us to enjoy them. He never meant them to be a substitute for Himself. Nor did He mean them to make us so weakly greedy that we would do anything, even commit sin, rather than be without them."

"Lent comes, and we give up some of our good food, some of our good times, some of our leisure and recreation, just to prove that we can be trusted. We master them for a few brief weeks so they cannot master us for life. We give up voluntarily so we may not be held slaves. We lay aside deliberately so we later may resume those lovely gifts of God—not because we are slaves of habit, but because of our own free will. We give up our glass of brandy so drink may never hold us captive. We give up the theatre so we may not be slaves of a good time. We abstain from food, not merely because we want to prove we are masters even of what we eat and drink, but because we want to test our wills."

"If we can't give up a steak, are we sure we could give up some powerful temptation? If we cannot conquer our appetite for a big luncheon, could we be trusted to conquer our appetite for some forbidden person? If we cannot get along without an egg for breakfast, are we certain we could hold back our hand from a jewel that we could take and no one be the wiser? Lent is a time when we prove ourselves trustworthy. More than that—if Lent is well carried through, it is a time when we make ourselves trustworthy. Do you see the connection, Mrs. Harrison?"

Just for God?

The rumble in Mrs. Harrison's throat may have been an indication of assent or a sign that she had long since ceased to regard the whole business as of any importance.

Miss Green was off on another tack.

"Then, ultimately, this whole matter of Lenten observance is for the sake of God. We want to give God something; is that it? We are keen to prove to Him that we are sufficiently trustworthy to be left as night-watchmen, so to speak, in His treasure house. We won't steal—see? We have taught ourselves not even to take our salary. We won't gorge ourselves. Watch, I can say no when I'm passed a chicken sandwich, even though it's twenty-four hours since my last meal. It's all a matter of impressing God."

Grace Melville secretly admired Shirley Green. She was known to be a young woman who was making a name for herself in the advertising world. She was a graduate of a swank Eastern college, already was earning more than many a bank's first vice-president, and she had a suave skepticism about her that amused Grace. Sometimes Grace told herself that, as a Catholic, she ought to resent Shirley's acid comments. Perversely, she found herself silently and secretly cheering them on.

Another Life

Father Hall felt that he must have missed something. He really thought that he had been stressing the good that renunciation did to a man's character and will. Evidently, he hadn't. He tried a new angle.

"Did you ever hear of the supernatural life?" "No," replied Shirley and Dr. Allenby. "Yes," simultaneously replied the rest.

"I'm sure you have," said Father Hall, "though the words may sound unfamiliar." He paused, groping for new words.

"Besides a body, we have a soul that lives an existence of its own and is destined for an eternal existence beyond this life."

"A sort of astral body?" Shirley was now frankly mocking. She had caught the admiration in Grace's eyes.

"No; nothing like it." The priest looked through her and she knew he was just a little bored and a trifle disgusted with her flippancy. She had the grace to feel ashamed.

"Sorry, I was being smart," she apologized. "Yes, I understand what you mean by the life of the soul."

Two Diets

Father Hall continued, "Well, we Catholics are tremendously impressed with the importance of the supernatural life. We believe that it is given to us in baptism; that it can be developed, trained, matured, lost, regained, deepened; that it can be sickened and restored to health; that it can be extremely weak and powerfully vigorous. Supernatural life is analogous in a remarkable degree to the life of the body."

"Now, one of the big instrumentalities of modern medicine in its care of the body is diet."

"And fasting." Mrs. Bradley was on sure ground. "Do you know, there's a doctor here in town that all the women are mad about. He starts them off by letting them eat practically nothing for three days. It does the most incredible things to their complexions and before he gets through, what he has done to their figure,—"

Fasting for Beauty

"Made 'em look like skeletons wrapped in loose parchment," growled her husband.

Mrs. Harrison emerged again. "When I was a little girl, it was a disgrace to look like your family couldn't afford to keep you. When I was married, I weighed one hundred and forty-five pounds, and padded all over for fear my young man would think me skinny. I don't know what's come over the women, thinking that men are going to fall in love with a skeleton in chiffon." She then submerged again.

"Sounds like an old Turkish empress, doesn't she?" whispered Grace. They all nodded wordlessly.

"You were saying?" prompted Mrs. Bradley.

"For a minute I was afraid Mrs. Harrison was going to make it impossible for me to make a case for dieting," Father Hall replied.

Mrs. Harrison murmured, "Eat what you like and when you like. I weigh one hundred and eighty, and if it wasn't for an occasional attack of indigestion and this infernal foot of mine..."

They sat silently, until they felt she had slipped again across the threshold of consciousness.

"Behold!" said the priest, with the slightest gesture of his hand in Mrs. Harrison's direction. "Overweight, indigestion, gout, and sleepiness. Good argument for dieting, don't you think?"

They nodded in understanding.

Over-Eating

“It has often been a wonder to me,” Father Hall continued, “how some of our ancestors lived. Did you ever see Hogarth’s picture of the Lord Mayor of London’s dinner? Every guest with a whole chicken, a round of beef, a leg of lamb, a suet pudding, a loaf of bread, and a gallon jug of ale. No wonder our ancestors developed their incredible equators, their paunches that overflowed straight from their chins to their knees, their gout, their high blood pressure, their apoplexy, their rheumatism, and their sudden deaths.”

“Your modern doctor insists on diet, fasting, watchfulness regarding rich food, much more than he insists on medicines or even on exercise. A man who is a drunkard is physically ill. A glutton is heading for a stroke. A woman who plunges into rich food is playing hob with her figure and her health. Red meats may be eaten with moderation. The old breakfasts, where a man sat down to two pounds of cold roast beef, a ring of sausages, a loaf of black bread, and two quarts of beer, would be regarded today as little less poisonous than arsenic on toast.”

Body and Soul

Father Hall continued, “As Mrs. Bradley suggested, all sorts of cures now begin with complete fasts. All sorts of diets banish meats and sweets altogether. That’s why, many years ago, Mr. Dooley recorded a famous argument between Father Kelly and Doc Grogan, both of Archy Road.”

“Lent is good for the soul,” said Father Kelly. “Lent is good for the body,” said old Doc Grogan. And they were both right.

The entire roomful laughed, and Mrs. Harrison laughed a little uncertainly, not having heard the discussion, but being aroused by the laughter it had evoked.

“It’s odd,” said Father Hall, meditatively, “how modern medicine has only caught up with what the Church has long commanded and commended. I wonder if the Lenten fast, considered merely as a practice of health, with its cutting down of meat, its eliminating of one heavy meal and consequent rest to the digestive tract, its trimming sweets, tobacco, and liquor, isn’t exactly what many a doctor would order as an excellent thing for a modern man or woman.”

“He might at that,” replied Mr. Bradley, suddenly pulling his hand back as it had started to reach out for the brandy bottle. However, Father Hall was not urging an argument; he was merely thinking aloud.

Fast Souls

Father Hall continued, “That, however, is not the point. Our souls get fatty, no doubt of it. They tend to get lazy, easy-going, and well fed. Any sort of self-indulgence is bad for the character. Virtues grow slack with easy ways of life. A pampered body usually houses a slack soul. A body grown fat because it is richly dined and warmly wined, is likely to drag along with it a soul that has little of virtue and less of heroism.”

“A man certainly grows spiritually stronger as he masters his appetites, whatever they are. If he always reaches out his hand for whatever pleases his eye or stimulates his palate, he finds his will getting flabby and inert. A completely masterful man is a man who can say to himself and to all his faculties, Do or Do Not or Stop or Continue and be sure of immediate obedience.”

Or Leave It Alone

“Remember always that giving up food in Lent is almost a sort of symbol. Taking or leaving food is not the important thing. Having the ability to take it or leave it, that’s important. The grit required to push aside a tempting dish may be the test of one’s strength of soul. The power to drive one’s body ahead when it is annoyingly insistent on food is a strength test for the will.”

Mr. Bradley grinned and replied, “I’ve never heard a fellow brag that he could take drink or leave it alone who ever left it alone. He could take it, all right, but when he started bragging about being able to leave it alone, it was a ten-to-one shot that he couldn’t leave it alone anymore.”

He picked up the bottle and walked with it across the room, setting it down with an emphatic thud in the center of the table. He turned and eyed his friends sternly, saying, “I call your attention to the fact that I made no boasts. But I trust that actions speak louder than words.” They all applauded him and cheered in mock encouragement.

Symbol

Mrs. Bradley asked, “If food is only a symbol, is that why the Church has excused most people from fasting during Lent?”

Father Hall hesitated before replying, “The Church is convinced,” he said at last, “that we live in difficult times. We are not the robust race that once pioneered through a tough, hard world. We are not used to cold houses and meals taken when we could get them.”

He continued, "We are more nervous. We are primarily doing more mental work and we are exposed to the peculiar illnesses of civilization. That is why the Church is quite lenient about its dispensations. It does not want any of its laws to be a burden or cause anyone physical harm."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Dr. Allenby, in a sudden change of front. "A certain amount of actual dieting, fasting, and abstaining would do us all a lot of good. I could wish that the Church would not get too lenient."

Too Lenient

Father Hall replied, "I only wish that the Church could be half as effective in making its followers fast and abstain as the beauty specialists are when they deal with our ladies. I'd hate to put one of my penitents on the diet thousands of women are taking to keep their weight under one hundred and thirty."

"And what we will give up to keep our complexions clear!" agreed Mrs. Bradley.

"Let's hope the Church doesn't get too lenient," Dr. Allenby said seeming to persist in being the full-fledged convert. Father Hall restrained any look of surprise. If the professor was won over by the logic of Lent....

"I was thinking," said their host once more, "of the diets and abstinences that athletes go through when they are in training."

Training

Father Hall nodded.

"I've often used that as an argument with young men," he said. "I've pointed out how, before a fight, fighters eat nothing for twenty-four hours. Here, we are fighting with the powers of darkness for the eternal crown. I've reminded them how football players in training give up smoking, sweets, pork, and certain starches. I've shown them the connection between correct dieting and winning Olympic championships. Here, we, in the words of Saint Paul, run for a great prize."

"We are spiritual athletes. Our Lent is a time of spiritual training. Our Lenten diet is our spiritual training table. We have a difficult contest ahead. We have bold, aggressive, and well-trained adversaries to conquer. We have to be in training. We must be careful that we are not fat, flabby, and full of rich food and debilitating drink."

How It Started

“But I thought you said that food was just a symbol?” Shirley Green could not resist a last mild jibe.

“And so I did. I suppose the Church chose food because, at the time when Lent was established, really good Catholics had not much else to give up. They could not go to the pagan theatres as they either did not exist or were filthy and places of open sin. The parties of the Christians were more likely to be religious Love Feasts (the lovely Agapes) than dances or bridges. At that time, luxuries were for the rich and not placed within easy reach of everyone. A child at the time who had a peach or a ripe fig tasted a delicacy comparable to a modern two-pound box of candy. Yet, food was naturally universal. Food could be curtailed. Food, therefore, became the accepted symbol and passed into Church law. At any rate, abstinence from food was practiced and hallowed by holy men of all religions. It was blessed by the example of Christ’s fast.”

The Spirit

“It was, however, the spirit behind the renunciation of food that was really important. Men did not fast because it was a time of sorrow for sin. By their voluntary penance, they were preparing for the terrible passion and death that Christ would undergo during Holy Week. Their abstinence from food was a sort of reparation to Christ for His torturing thirst upon the Cross. They could not be glad when Christ was facing death. Thus, they were offering something to God for the gift of His Son going to death for sinful men.”

“Now that spirit must go on. Fasting has been more readily dispensed. The spirit of sorrow for sin, of apology for insult, of giving to Him something precious or difficult, is in no way changed. So, it is important that little children be taught voluntarily to give up their candy as a gift to God. Dancing feet must be quieted because Christ’s feet drag along the Way of the Cross.”

“All of us, as spiritual athletes, must go into training for the well-being of our souls, strengthening our will against the struggles that every man must meet, growing vigorous in body and spirit for the race toward heaven. We must make ourselves and prove ourselves spiritually trustworthy. The world is so beautiful and so seductive that we are wise to test for ourselves how far it has mastered us and how far we have mastered it. It is the spirit of Lent that matters.”

Hard Things

Mrs. Harrison heaved herself up heavily. “Now, what are you all talking about?” she demanded.

“Lent,” replied Mrs. Bradley. “Lent begins on Wednesday, and we were all discussing...” Mrs. Harrison forgot her former statement and made a face. “I hate Lent,” she said.

Father Hall shrugged his shoulders as they all looked at him and laughed.

“Thus speaks the voice of nature,” he said. “But then how few things that are really good for us are easy to take—visits to the dentist, exercise, work, spinach, early rising, practicing the piano....”

And they let it go at that.

Nihil Obstat:

F. Moynihan,
Censor Deputatus.

Imprimatur:

✠ D. Mannix,
Archiepiscopus Melbournensis.





This e-book was produced by:

The Seraphim Company, Inc.

**8528 Kenosha Drive
Colorado Springs, CO 80908-5000**

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